

## Digital Platform Labor in the Philippines: Emerging Configurations and Policy Implications

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### I. Introduction: Digitalization and the platformization of labor

Technological development and rapid global connectivity are spurring on new business models, including the rise of ‘planetary labor markets’ (Graham and Anwar 2019). These include crowdwork labor platforms involving work arrangements where workers or “sellers of labor” (many of them located in the Global South) obtain work from digital labor platforms such as *Upwork* (catering to global workers) or *Onlinejobs.ph* (catering only to Filipino workers), which match them with potential clients or “buyers of labor,” often based in the Global North (Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta 2017; Wood, et al. 2018). In contrast to business process outsourcing (BPO) such as call center work, digital labor platforms represent a new model as they allow business processes to be outsourced without the mediation of formal BPO companies (Wood 2018; Soriano and Panaligan 2019).

Data on labor supply in online labor platforms show that the Philippines, together with India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, are now the major sources of labor supply globally (Graham, et al. 2017). Payoneer (2020) data also shows the Philippines as first among the fastest growing freelancing economies in the world. Recent available statistics estimate that there are one and a half (1.5) million Filipino digital platform workers (also referred to as ‘online freelancers’) who are engaged in various project-based services or “gigs” (i.e. ranging from software development and writing to more commonly, administrative support, virtual assistance, digital marketing, content moderation, data entry, and language instruction, among others) for overseas clients (Ofreneo 2018; Schnabel 2018; Graham et al. 2017).

This paper presents key developments and issues concerning digital platform labor in the Philippines, and identifies implications for policy. It will unfold in three parts. First, I introduce the emergence of platform labor in the Philippines and situate it in the broader context and history of the Philippine labor economy, situating platform labor alongside other forms of global service-work promoted by the Philippine government as part of its labor policy. Then, I will discuss issues emerging from the intrinsic nature of labor platformization as well as the experiences of Filipino platform workers in this sector, including available government response. Finally, I conclude by identifying key implications to policy and action.

### II. The Philippines and digital labor: A viable match?

The Philippine government champions digital labor as a way to overcome employment woes faced by Filipinos across age groups and educational background (Fenol 2018). Ranked as having one of the highest unemployment rates in Asia but with a large English proficient population, the government’s support for platform labor aligns with promoting Filipinos as ‘world class service workers,’ a mantra that has also driven the country’s labor export policy over the past decades, often despite the precariousness associated with such work (Parreñas 2015; Rodriguez 2010). From foreign domestic labor to call center labor and now to digital

platform labor, Filipinos perform work that lead to them being recognized as the service workers of the world (Soriano and Cabañes 2020a, 2020b).

Labor platforms and BPO work arrangements arose in the context of what Weil (2014) called the “fissured workplace,” resulting from strategies of firms to shed in-house workers for jobs that they can outsource to workers in the Global South for much lower rates. Seen by government as a way of spurring national growth through job creation and countryside development via ICT, the Department of Information and Communications Technology or DICT (then Information Technology and e-Commerce Council) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) were tapped to develop and sustain the growth of ICT industries and promote business process outsourcing jobs since the early 2000s (ITECC Strategic Roadmap 2003). DICT created a Cyberservices Group to eye the “next wave cities” (i.e. Metro Manila, Cebu, Angeles, Cavite, Davao) and make way for the growth of BPO industries there. Based on available statistics, over half a million Filipinos were involved in the BPO industry in 2017 (Philippine Statistics Authority 2018), and the sector is a major contributor to the economy, projected to generate \$29 billion in revenues in 2022 according to the Information Technology and Business Process Association of the Philippines or IBPAP (IBPAP 2020). BPO work includes call center activities, computer programming, data entry and processing, medical transcription, software publishing (Kleibert 2015). Many of these jobs are now also available from online labor platforms for workers who can perform the work from home and without the need to be formally employed in BPO companies.

In 2013, Elance and Odesk (now Upwork) and Freelancer.com coordinated with the DICT for the promotion of online platform labor, then foreseen as an emerging opportunity for meeting the same goal of job creation, but this time also addressing the needs of the marginalized sector, such as out-of-school youth, unemployed, persons with disabilities, or returning overseas workers, who may not qualify for regular employment in BPO work (Delfin and Fabricante 2020, Personal Communication, February 5, 2020). DICT co-organized roadshows with these digital platforms, which then started its “Rural Impact Sourcing” project (now rebranded as “digitaljobsPH”) which covers the roll out of ICT skills training in the countryside.

Now, platform labor is being promoted not only to address the needs of the unemployed and marginalized groups, but as a complement to BPO work, a catalyst for urban and rural development, and even an attractive option for young graduates and Filipino migrant workers. Filipino professionals are also migrating to online platform labor under the promise of autonomy, spatial flexibility, and the possibility for higher earning, especially in dollars (Soriano and Cabanes 2020a). Based on our research, many Filipinos who are currently involved in online labor platforms are former BPO (i.e. call center) workers, who left this work due to persistent night shifts and its toll on their health, considerable stress in the nature of the job, lengthy travel time from the home to the office, or personal circumstances that prod them to find opportunities to “work-from-home” (i.e. pregnancy, physical disability or major illness, and having to care for growing children or elderly parents). The label “OFW” which used to refer to the “Overseas Filipino Worker” has recently been appropriated to refer to the “Online Freelance Worker,” where one still earns dollars but now without having to leave the country (Go 2017). The continued popularity of platform labor in the Philippines is anchored in the continuing expansion of the country’s informal economy (Ofreneo 2013). There are many who belong to the “informal economy” (i.e. obtaining various gigs in their everyday lives as food or “mobile phone load” sellers in community stores, caregivers, student-research assistants, among others), who are eagerly jumping into opportunities for clinching a job in online labor platforms.

Yet, optimistic narratives about platform labor are challenged by evidence from scholars who point out the difficult conditions that online platform workers face (Graham, et al. 2017, Lehdonvirta 2016; Gandini 2016; Gregg 2013; van Doorn 2017; Soriano and Cabañes 2020a, 2020b). Amidst promotions of flexibility and empowerment, online platform workers are often construed to have ‘no secure occupational identity’ given the

continued movement across jobs that may not allow the full use of their educational qualifications (Standing 2014, p.10). Some of these workers perform jobs that their counterparts in the more economically affluent nations refuse to take on (Irani and Silberman 2013, p.18). Many companies in the Global North also take advantage of the large pool of digital workers from the Global South (Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta 2017; Lehdonvirta 2016) that lead to exploitation. Local workers in turn accept low pay or dedicate long hours in hopes of securing long-term clients or obtaining impressive work portfolios (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Lehdonvirta 2016). Among the major concerns about platform workers also relate to issues of isolation and lack of opportunity for socialization (Gandini 2016; Graham et al. 2017). Paradoxically connected to the perceived advantage of flexibility pertains to being constantly at work and where the worker's personal space appears to be endlessly consumed by work, also reinforced by work trackers such as *Hubstaff* that are required by some clients.

Despite research and narratives of platform labor's pernicious and precarious conditions, it is undeniable that for many Filipinos, these jobs are perceived to be the best alternative given existing conditions and available options (Soriano and Cabañes 2020a, 2020b). In fact, some of the freelance workers we interviewed have found online freelance work to be highly fulfilling, allowing them to earn significantly, raise their families comfortably, and even obtain a sense of self-worth.<sup>1</sup>

### III. Digital platform labor conditions: Emerging issues

Despite government pronouncements promoting digital labor as a solution to unemployment, institutionalized mechanisms for supporting workers engaged in labor platforms remain limited. In contrast to the availability of established human resource offices or labor agencies that help regular workers in terms of expectation-setting, salary identification, taxation, or welfare protection, platform labor aspirants and workers are often left out on their own, with only a limited set of support mechanisms available. I summarize the major issues encountered by online freelancers below.

#### 1. Labor platformization and the mechanics of algorithmic control

Much of the recent work on digital labor in the Global South highlights the fraught conditions of platform labor, where workers assume a powerless position against their clients and the disciplinary features of the platform. Although our research has shown that some Filipino workers are able to navigate this environment, it is undeniable that many of the issues and difficulties faced by online platform workers are tied to the very platformization of labor.

Labor platforms match labor demand and labor supply and workers, upon constructing an attractive portfolio, can directly bid for jobs available in these labor platforms. Workers are paid directly through the platform or via global payment systems such as Payoneer or PayMaya. Different platforms have different policies on how many jobs a worker can bid on. Platforms also impose different fee cuts per transaction (e.g. Upwork charges 20% of the fee for new entrants in the platform, while Onlinejobs.ph does not charge a fee). In online freelancing Facebook groups, workers would complain about the increasing fee cuts imposed by the platform, to which they have no control over. They also report about unfair account suspensions and the lack of dispute mechanisms embedded in some of the platforms.

Workers do not possess formal employee-employer relationships with their clients, although workers may enter into separate agreements with specific clients on a case to case basis. The work is also characterized by the absence of non-wage benefits such as health coverage, paid leave, or retrenchment benefits (Kalleberg

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1. It is important to note that online platform labor covers a wide range of jobs—some of which command high rates such as software or applications development or web design to those that command lower rates such as virtual assistance, data encoding, search engine optimization, or transcription.

2009). Instead, workers enter into a ‘contract’ with the platform, for example, that disallows them from entering into direct transactions with clients outside the platform. Further, similar to Uber or Grab, clients may rate the workers for each project and these accumulated ratings constitute the workers’ portfolio, which in turn, also determines his or her chances of getting hired again. On the other hand, there are often no mechanisms for workers to rate their clients on the platform. This rating system may also contribute to self-exploitation, where some workers would take on large or difficult projects at low rates believing that when they can get good ratings they could eventually be able to command higher rates. Given that they are directly employed through the platforms that operate on a global level, they are also unlikely to be able to access state benefits or protections or other local support systems. Some workers we interviewed are able to establish good relationships with their clients who offer benefits such as bonuses or health allowances, but this happens a case-to-case basis and not a mandatory feature of platform work.

A particular emerging issue is ‘labor arbitrage,’ where clients have the capacity of selecting from amongst a global pool of workers and buy the cheapest available labor (Graham et al. 2017, p.142). This puts workers in a precarious bargaining position as they have minimal control—the only control they have is in the choice of bidding for jobs that they would deem to be reasonably priced. Yet given increasing competition and ‘labor seasonality’ (i.e. characterized by a period of good availability of jobs but also sudden periods of “job scarcity”), many workers are compelled to bid for any job available even at rates that go below their expectations (Soriano and Cabanes 2020a). As workers enrich their portfolios, the more experienced ones learn the art of strategic pricing and negotiation and they become more selective in the kinds of jobs and rates that they take on.

Tied to the platformization of labor is the fact that there are no clear standards (unlike in formal employment) for acceptable rates for the jobs offered in these platforms, and many workers have only minimal clues on how to price their work or which job-rate offers to accept. Pricing may differ depending on the unique characteristic of each job (i.e. depending on the size or capacity of the company, the complexity, size and duration of the job, the reasonableness of the client, and so on). In turn, workers would offer different rates for the same job given their varying profiles and conditions too (i.e. experience, confidence and aggressiveness in pricing, labor seasonality, or even desperation). Labor platforms rarely intervene in these pricing negotiations—their role is simply to match labor buyers and sellers. This nature of platform labor pricing is ambiguous especially for new entrants and is prone to exploitation. On occasion, some workers shared experiences of jobs that suddenly shutdown or clients disappearing before they can be paid for their services, and lamented the lack of mechanisms for “penalizing clients.”

## **2. Labor platform literacy and human capital development**

For newcomers, platform labor can be confusing: not only is the process of engaging in platform labor fully mediated, but one also needs to discern legitimate platforms and clients from scammers, and present oneself and one’s skills in a compelling manner and in a foreign language.

### ***Portfolio building and skill-selling***

A crucial first step for a platform worker considering to bid for a job in a labor platform is to develop a portfolio. This implies the need for a sense of understanding how to present one’s skills and related work experience in a compelling manner. Interestingly, some workers shared that a good portfolio is valued in the labor platform more than a college degree. Inability to create a good online portfolio can determine the likelihood of getting a client or their capacity to command high rates. Unfortunately, this poses a challenge for many workers, particularly the new entrants who have none to limited significant experience to display in the portfolio but also have no literacy for composing a compelling one. Portfolio building is offered by some

emerging “trainers” whom we referred to as “skill-makers” in an earlier work (Soriano and Panaligan 2019), but they usually charge fees that are not affordable for beginners.

### ***Skills development, skills-matching, upskilling and transitioning into “agencies”***

Workers entering the digital platform economy may not have educational or professional training for jobs that they are eyeing but believe that getting employment is possible if they can get the right training for success.

Since 2018, the Department of ICT has started offering free online freelancing training nationwide under their “digitaljobsPH” program. The program is reported to have produced over 2,000 graduates from 94 locations throughout the country (DICT 2020). DigitaljobsPH offers technical skills training modules that include (1) Digital Marketing and eCommerce, (2) Search Engine Marketing, Advertising, and Virtual Assistance, (3) Graphic Design, (4) Content Writing, (5) Website Development, and (6) Social Media Marketing (Ibid.). These courses comprise a “21-day online campaign” that includes requiring trainees to develop a website for a small-to-medium local enterprise—aimed at helping boost the trainee’s technical profile while making a contribution to the local economy (Delfin, E. Personal Communication, February 5, 2020). Apart from the DICT, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) intends to carry out initiatives in preparation for what they term to be industry 4.0 (Rubia-Tutay et al. 2019). However, the agency has only recently started to grasp the realities of digital platform labor and its attendant issues and these are to be incorporated in the agency’s subsequent policy planning and programming (Avila, A. Personal Communication, January 30, 2020).

Much of existing government initiatives focus on technical training, and based on interviews with some workers who have attended these training, many of these sessions cater to entrants or beginners in online freelancing, again understandably due to the DICT’s direction of platform labor as a way to create jobs for marginalized groups in the countryside. Some workers expressed concern that DICT’s “digitaljobsPH” strategy tends to further expand the pool of low-waged aspirants with very limited skills that can end up “killing” existing freelancers, creating a false illusion of success yet with some ending up unhired after training. Some of the workers and industry influencers we interviewed suggest that the DICT consider offering strategies for upskilling and focus on higher quality and more specialized courses. Yet, although DICT digitaljobsPH team recognizes this need, they pointed out the importance of ample budgetary support, given that advanced trainings cost more even as these reach less number of workers (Delfin, E. Personal Communication, February 5, 2020).

### ***Strategic pricing and rate negotiation***

As aforementioned, many workers have difficulty estimating acceptable rates for different job scopes. More experienced workers would also advise workers to avoid accepting very low rates, as “they can be pegged as cheap workers” with difficulty in increasing their rates in the future. During an online freelancer event a speaker raised the issue of the tendency of Filipinos to charge lower rates in comparison to their competitors from other parts of the world. As we have argued elsewhere, online platform workers need help not only in discerning a pricing strategy given specific jobs, but also in diversifying platforms (Soriano and Cabanes 2020) that will prevent them from being unable to increase rates because of dependency on a single platform.

### ***Reputation and relationship-building with clients***

Another common emerging issue is how to “build a reputation,” “cultivate expertise,” and “maintain good relationships with clients.” In an economy underscored by the proliferation of project-based employment and

also a visible evaluation and ranking system, the role played by reputation is crucial for determining one's success (Gandini 2016, p.8; Wood et al. 2018). Getting 'repeat clients' or obtaining 'long-term projects' helps workers mitigate the threats of labor seasonality and increased competition. However, with many of the clients being foreign and without clear guidelines on how to maintain relationships in purely virtual work environments, relationship-building becomes a common issue among workers. In conversations in Facebook groups, workers reveal the competing experiences—with some displaying the generosity of clients while others lamenting experiences with abusive ones (for an expanded account, see Soriano and Cabañes 2020b).

Again, given that existing training provided by the government often center on technical skills development, these offer limited support for addressing the realities of dealing with foreign clients on an everyday basis, a peculiar nature of online platform work. Without guidance and training, some workers are compelled to invest in expensive coaching offered by 'skillmakers,' (Soriano and Panaligan 2019) or learn by experience, sometimes after having experienced exploitation or abuse.

### 3. Health and social security and financial literacy

An often neglected concern among digital platform workers is the issue of health and wellness. Our interviews showed that many platform workers are exposed to stress, isolation, long hours of sitting, overwork, and lack of exercise. One platform worker shared that she gained over 100 pounds since she started with online freelancing, but has recently started to exercise when she was admitted to the hospital for hypertension and breathing difficulties. Following the notion that one's earning can grow limitless with the amount of time and effort, some platform workers would narrate that they would not come out of the house for days and eventually find it difficult to interact with people. Interestingly, we have seen in Facebook groups that some workers have illnesses or physical disabilities that compelled them to take on online jobs, primarily because their physical disabilities disqualify them from applying for regular jobs. Yet they may not receive guidance in preventing their conditions from worsening off. Existing initiatives of the DICT tend to focus on training workers for technical skills, but these do not cover wellness training crucial to the specific conditions of platform workers. What compounds this is that many of the workers do not subscribe to health insurance, and there is no current mechanism for documenting this number. This is voluntary and purely shouldered by workers, unlike workers for regular companies who may automatically enjoy the benefit of health insurance in accordance with the law or corporate policy.

Workers are also concerned about their financial security due to the seasonality of work. Yet, many workers do not consciously invest in social security arrangements believing that it is not necessarily an "urgent need." Given the health issues faced by these workers in the long-term, it is important for the government to assist digital platform workers in securing affordable and accessible mechanisms for social and financial security and in helping understand the value of investing in these as continuous freelance work may expose them to long-term risks that they may not have capacity to cope with.

DICT does not see the promotion of health and social security of online freelancers as within the scope of their mandate, which focuses on "ICT job creation." This is compounded by the issue that although platform labor is assumed to support job creation, the absence of effective monitoring mechanisms implies that their contribution to other tangible measures of economic growth, such as GDP (especially as many of them do not declare their earnings nor pay taxes), is not well-documented. Currently, no government agency is leading a program that attends to the social and financial security of digital platform workers, albeit such would naturally require the effective inter-agency collaboration of national government agencies which historically has been found to be difficult.

Recently, an online freelance worker cooperative, Filipino Online Professionals Cooperative (FOPSCO), has been formed and included in their proposed program is the promotion of health security mechanisms for

their members. Platform workers who are members of FOPSCO are also expected to earn from investments of the coop, aimed at addressing periods of low employment.

#### 4. Business development

Government can train workers towards becoming “worker-agencies.” Established workers who manage to acquire large projects become whom they call ‘agencies’ who outsource projects or segments of their projects to other workers (sometimes even family members or neighbors) and therefore wield a significantly larger social and financial capital. In the local digital platform scene, these agents are whom workers consider to be “successful” and whom they aspire to.<sup>2</sup> Worker-agencies who have managed to retain a stable pool of “loyal” clients and large projects also receive some protection from the blows of labor seasonality. As workers take on larger projects with long-term clients, the percentage rate of what they pay the platform can become lower (i.e. this is so for Upwork, but not for all platforms), also often with additional cash and non-cash benefits negotiated with clients directly. When they are able to sustain a loyal pool of large clients, a large portfolio of projects, and a pool of workers, some of the successful agencies establish their own tech start-ups and labor platforms.

Some of these local labor platforms are established by online freelance workers as a form of resistance and critique toward the precarious conditions underlying global crowdwork platforms or by rising industry influencers or worker-agencies who have managed to obtain a stable enough pool of loyal clients to build tech start-ups. While ‘planetary labour markets’ (Graham and Anwar 2019) remain outside government regulation, Philippine-based labor platforms and online freelancing-oriented start-ups (e.g. *Connected Women*, *WrupUp*, *Third Team Media*, and *EStrat Marketing*) are registered as local businesses and are expected to be more invested in promoting the welfare of local workers as they have been created precisely as a result of their experience with or to address the unfair conditions of planetary labor markets. For example, *WrupUp*, a tech-start-up labor platform based in the city of Iligan, is aimed at challenging established labor platforms and establishing a fairer source of digital jobs for Filipino workers. *WrupUp* seeks to promise fairer rates, provide training, and intends to promote forced savings from each job transaction to safeguard the workers during “low seasons” (Libradilla, A., Founder of *WrupUp*, Personal Communication, November 6, 2020). The downside is that *WrupUp* is having difficulty in competing with the larger and more popular platforms and in attracting more prominent workers. There is a need to examine the design and labor dynamics of these emerging initiatives. In comparison to global platforms, it is possible for the Philippine government to direct its attention to these start-ups, ensuring that they promote fair labor standards and to provide support for their growth and development.

#### 5. Infrastructure and materiality of digital labor

The issue of reliable and affordable internet connectivity in the Philippines is another concern that many workers raised during our research (Lopez 2020). Although most workers have no choice but to invest in high speed internet connectivity regardless of the cost, workers located in the provinces or suburban communities have narrated the high cost of connectivity as well as instances of internet downtime that would compel them to perform work in coworking spaces or cafes, thereby incurring more expensive costs.

In other countries, coworking spaces have sprouted across the cities and these offer sites for workers not only for affordable and reliable connectivity and workspace, but to function as spaces for training, ‘serendipity production,’ and collaboration (Moriset 2016). As we have argued elsewhere (Tintiangko and Soriano 2020),

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2. For example, a worker turned “agency” shared that a ‘virtual assistant’ would typically earn around \$2–\$6 per hour but a ‘project manager’ or agency would be able to command around \$10–20 per hour, despite performing the same job. The project manager can secure this position by being able to strategically develop one’s portfolio and having an ‘entrepreneurial mindset.’

while coworking spaces in more affluent countries serve as a means to ease the cost of independent work, the average rate of P550 (around US\$10) per day, which is higher than the average minimum wage in Metro Manila, proves too costly for most Filipino online freelancers to expend on a regular basis.

Recognizing the need for affordable infrastructure support, DICT is rolling out working facilities called ‘RIS Hubs’ (Sanchez 2020). Among these hubs is the DICT-Zamboanga hub, which offers free access to computers, high-speed internet, and digital skills training for online freelancers. Such initiative can be expanded in rural areas to address individual differences in material capacity of workers but these should ideally have intermediaries who can help train platform workers for upskilling.

#### IV. Reflections for policy

One emerging policy issue pertains to the fact that digital platform labor is being advanced by the Philippines government’s lead ICT agency following a rather narrow vision centered on jobs creation through ICT. The agency’s success on this aspect is measured in terms of how many ICT-related jobs it is able to create across the country and especially in the countryside, but not in terms of the value of these jobs, the health and welfare of the workers, or long-term sustainability of the sector. The primary labor and employment agency, DOLE, has only recently been paying attention to this industry as well. This means that although the DICT has been successful in expanding the talent pool by training aspiring workers, there is no other government agency paying attention to the welfare, social and financial security, advancement, and sustainability of these digital platform workers. Unlike regular employment which is covered by labor laws and with unionizing mechanisms that put them in bargaining positions with companies to safeguard workers against abuse, platform work presents a challenging arrangement.

The second main issue is that there are no workable mechanisms for monitoring the contributions of this sector in terms of the GDP or national growth that would push for the need to provide social security support for the workers. Developing a holistic approach to online platform labor and human capital development that includes a workable monitoring system would allow government to know what kind of training facilitate success in securing well-paid projects on the platform, whether advance training help them transition into ‘agencies,’ or the extent by which workers are paid or abused in the platforms. At the same time, a monitoring system could help determine the conditions of workers beyond job placement, and refer them to concerned agencies for support.

Given the limitations of policy and program support, many workers attempt to solve the problems by themselves, by joining worker cooperatives or Facebook communities of support or independently navigating their way through the digital platform environment (Soriano and Cabanes 2020b). This entrepreneurialism of workers should not be a ticket for the State to elide its responsibility over a large pool of workers involved in an industry that it also actively promotes. The absence of systematic interventions render the conditions unequal—accessible to those who are entrepreneurial and able to tap into available opportunities and social safety nets by themselves, while others are left to suffer its exploitative and pernicious conditions.

The third key issue concerns the regulation of labor platforms in ‘planetary labor markets.’ Platform work is typically characterized by the absence of mandated non-wage benefits such as health coverage, paid leave, or disability benefits. They also often have no clear employer-employee relationship with their clients, making bargaining to improve work conditions difficult. Some workers have also experienced scamming clients and agents, abusive work conditions, or below-the-industry average rates, apart from the regular struggles with labor seasonality given the increasing competition among global workers in these platforms.

Policy proposals for supporting digital workers are currently under deliberation. These include *House Bill No. 6759 (An Act Supporting the Growth and Development of Digital Careers in the Philippines)*<sup>3</sup> which was recently approved by the Philippine House of Representatives, and which seeks to provide for the extension of



social support systems and standards for ‘digital workers’ in the country, expected to rise in number given labor displacement caused by the pandemic. As a counterpart bill, *Senate Bill No. 1469 (An Act Supporting the Growth and Development of Digital Careers in the Philippines)*<sup>4</sup> has also been filed and is currently at initial discussion in the Philippine Senate. Further, *House Bill No. 5369 (An Act Providing Protection and Incentives for Freelancers)*<sup>5</sup> is being deliberated in Congress to spell out mechanisms for the protection of freelance workers from abuse, also with an accompanying Senate Bill.

While these policy proposals are specific to the unique nature of digital and freelance work, proposing to offer freelance workers economic safeguards (also as cushion for the pandemic’s impact), the bills need to take into consideration how social protection systems (including health and safety measures) will be arranged and bargained for given that clients and platforms operate both globally and locally. This is in consideration of the global nature of labor platformization and the multiple contracting arrangements that involve Filipino workers with foreign and local clients. Further, beyond the continued promotion of digital careers, government policies need to be clear in terms of how the condition of digital workers will be monitored and safeguarded, ensuring that they have access to these social support systems.

Given the difficulty for intervention by governments as regards labor platformization, global movements such as Fairwork are now supporting research and advocacy work to put pressure upon global platforms. In the Philippine scene, what might be more immediately feasible is for the government to attend to the emergence of local labor platforms as tech start-ups which it can both regulate and support.

In summary, I emphasize that a holistic policy and program response is necessary to support digital platform work. This implies assessing the limitations of current initiatives and coming up with programs and policies to address workers’ needs as regards: (1) platform labor literacy and human capital development that goes beyond technical skills training; (2) promoting access to affordable social and health security, and financial literacy of workers; and (3) business development; and (4) addressing issues concerning infrastructure and materiality of labor.

Given the peculiar operation of global digital labor platforms, it would be difficult for governments to intervene in the relative power imbalance posed by the platforms over the workers. But without any systematic form of assessment of existing conditions of workers, governments would not be in any position to negotiate labor issues emerging from this industry. Extant literature suggest that new collective formations may exert pressure upon platforms to work for fairer pays and to take more responsibility over the exploitation that occur in their platforms (Wood, Lehdonvirta and Graham 2018). We are seeing local forces of collective action, such as WrupUp and FOPSCO, to be spouting as a form of response. In order to be sustainable, such initiatives would require the support of the government as well as uptake by the platform workers themselves. At the global level, it would be imperative for international labor organizations to continually look into the many issues that the platformization of labor poses and exert pressure for platforms to address issues toward a fairer and more humane working environment for digital platform workers.

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